

Off the Books

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Summary: Spartan 8076, Roger, is left behind enemy lines.

## Off the Books

A purple splotch of pure plasma arcs across a charred plain. It disappears from view for a moment while caught in the sun's rays and then descends upon a park. The impact sends up billowing clouds of sand and playground metal, the ground tremors can be felt a mile away. Spartan 8076, Roger, watches from a building's ledge on the limits of New Alexandria. From this high in the air Roger only feels a rumble as the building shakes on its foundations. The setting sun's brightness is diffused by the ensuing dust cloud, causing flickering sun spots to wink in and out of tumultuous existence, partially blinding Roger. He dims the brightness of his helmet's optical HUD and returns his chin to the stock of his sniper rifle. It is a pillow to which Roger has grown accustomed to in the last few days. Today, however, appears to be the end of his reconnaissance mission. Covenant artillery indicates that the enemy will soon be taking the city. In a tactic not dissimilar to Hitler's blitzkrieg, the Covenant begin most sieges with barrages of Wraith fire, followed by Banshee strafing runs followed by heavy infantry deployment. It is a tactic the UNSC has never successfully repelled, and they will not today. More bright globs of plasma are heaved through the air, a barrage of beautiful purple shades that choke the sky with their combined swarm. At their apex they are serene creatures looking down upon the world, but their descents cannot be mistaken for harbingers of death. They crash upon the ground, wave after wave, steadily crawling closer to the outer edges of the city, an earthquake to rival the apocalyptic chants of madmen. Roger keys up his COM unit and speaks one terse message.

"\_Whiskey Four, Tangoes no Sally, Over"\_

Static

"\_Message received, Whiskey Four, Over"\_

Roger is alone again above the trembling city. He activates the 12x optical zoom on his rifle and scans the horizon for infantry. Gleaming violet heads of Wraith tanks begin to crest the hills while Banshees scream overhead. The wraith's projectiles now begin to cascade directly onto Roger's position. Like hellfire it begins to wreck the buildings comprising Alexandria's western front. The noise of the destruction is deafening and Roger kills the sound feed on his helmet while picking up his rifle. Structures begin to collapse around him silently as though made of paper and fling dirt and debris across the streets. It is a magnificent wonder that Roger cannot appreciate as he sprints towards the other ledge of the building's roof. As he prepares to jump the roof gives way beneath him, sending the Spartan crashing downwards along with 10,000 tons of loose steel. A few strong punches to his body, then black.

\_Chasing two children, friends, ragged breathing and bursting chest. They're too fast but if he stops the drill instructors will beat him. The faces of stern adults with shaved heads and permanent sneers grow larger in his peripherals. Playing tag in a field. The faces get larger. Their voices growing from a drone to a cacophony of rumbling â€" \_

Solid. A chunk of solid rock. No, concrete, the smell of dust and blood. Rumbling continues. Training kicks in and Roger recognizes the tread of Covenant troops in mass. Blackness. He flexes his fingers, they brush against more concrete. The weight of a small house crushing down on him. Alien grunts and garbled speech pass by less than ten feet away. No human could lift this mass. Roger grunts and sets his back into it, pushing up and forward. Grinding metal causes him to stop. A sudden blood rush to his head makes everything swim before his eyes and

Black. No rumbling. The city is silent outside. Roger listens for a moment and moves the rest of his body. Flaring, shooting pain threatens to tear his left leg off. He lays a moment in darkness and silence. Satisfied that he is ready, Roger plants his back firmly and begins to push upward and forward. The massive pile of debris above him begins to slide and the firm grinding of metal on metal elicits a loud groan. Roger takes a large breath that aches deep in his chest and continues to lift. Slowly it rises, stray debris starts to fall near the bottom. A dim light breaks Roger's vision and with a roar he throws all of his strength into a final push. A sudden lightening of weight is followed by a loud crash as the bulk of the mass falls to the ground. Roger raises his good leg and plants it firmly against the concrete plating on top of him. He breathes and winces at the sharp stabs. He kicks the concrete off of him and it flops into the street. The night sky is lit by a multitude of stars. They illuminate the barren rubble of a destroyed city. Structures left standing remain so only as skeletal remains. Roger pushes himself up and limps down a slope of debris to where his rifle lays with a bent barrel in the street. He crouches and inspects the weapon. The scope remains intact and he swiftly detaches it, the weapon itself is useless save as a bludgeon. A breeze carries dust that flows over his armor and settles into the surrounding pile of rubble. Backing into a jutting overhang of metal, Roger tries activating his Spartan Acknowledgement Marker. Most functionality in his armor has been disabled by the impact trauma of the fall, but his SAM lights up in the bottom right corner of his HUD. He waits.

"Colonel we've just received acknowledgement of a Spartan, 8076,

active deep behind enemy lines, coordinates 87, 56, just west of the city. Advise on response sir."

Westfall sat grimly in the lion's chair and didn't glance at the private. A Spartan meant one more Spartan than the UNSC didn't have right now, and one already entrenched less than half a click behind current Covenant base of operations was an asset not to be wasted. It was true that those boys had gone through the most during the war. From what Westfall could glean from the spare information dug up on the program, most of the Spartans were dead. No entire team just went MIA. He rubbed a faded scar underneath his chin and thought. They couldn't afford to let this go.

"Route the channel to mine private"

"Yes sir"

Westfall keyed up the COM unit in his chair and spoke to 8076.

A phantom's whine drones overhead and begins to fade. 76 crouches around the corner and eyes the ship's trajectory through the dark. It begins to slow and descend less than half a kilometer away in the center of a cluster of standing buildings. Letting go of the wall, Roger limps through the rubble to a set of stairs leading into the opening mouth of a subway system. Roger stops outside, looking down. It's pitch black, the threatening maw of a hellish creature that could swallow up Roger in its infinite dark. Static bursts over his COM unit and startles the Spartan.

"\_Spartan 8076, this is Colonel Westfall, 5\_\_th\_\_ Infantry, do you read me son?"\_

Roger paused

"\_Spartan 8076, reporting Sir"\_

"\_Listen son, I know you're probably expecting an evac bird to pick you up and get you back in the fightâ€¦"\_

Roger anticipated the Colonel's reluctance to tell him the truth.

"â€¦\_but we just don't have the spare men to risk such a distant pick-up"\_

"With all due respect sir I know the situation, I'm enroute to mass Covenant formation half a click east of my location. Permission to remain sir?"

Silence

"\_Godspeed to you son, if we have the resources we'll let you know as soon as possible, over"\_

"Copy that sir, over"

Silence again. The whispers of a dead city begin to pick up and speak to Roger but he ignores them and starts his descent into the subway. Enveloped in the darkness he manually activates a spare flashlight located on his head, filling the dark space before him with light. He

shuffles to the subway tracks and slides down, painfully aware of his injury. Around him the walls seem as though they could go on forever or be confined to a mere inch from his face. His movements echo with clarity down the tunnels. He calculates distances and tries to remember the blueprints of Alexandria's underground train system. The next stop should put him within half a mile of the Covenant. Roger begins his walk with strained movements, one foot slightly lurching behind him, an underground pilgrim. One foot after the other. Just like training. Endless marches. Ceaseless exercises instilling discipline and iron will. Roger remembers it all.

"Hit the ground cadet"

Roger jumped at his drill sergeant's call and planted his hands and feet in pushup position. The ground smelled like dirt and it was earthy.

"Fifty on my mark cadet! Ready!

\*\*Hup\*\*!

1

Hup

2

Hup

3

Hup

Rapid fire lurching, arms burning

Hup

16

Hup

17

The rest of Roger's team was waiting at the crow's nest for him to come ring the bell. But Roger had made a mistake

Hup

25

Hup

Hold the position cadet!

Face straining, Roger cursed himself for not being able to sneak through Red Base. He was given a choice damnit. He didn't have to slouch through the base to set off a diversion. Any competent leader would have taken a hostage or rigged explosives or told his team they were doing a full frontal assault.

"Caught slinking like a coward eh 8076? Real

professional"

Hup

27

Hup

28

His limbs were already sore from the merciless beating he received by Red Team and now they flared as though burnt by plasma.

Hup

48

Hup

49

Hold the position cadet

The drill instructor had leaned close and whispered, "Your team Roger, think in terms of numbers, not people. I want results, not heroes. You might think heroes win wars but they never have, all they end up with are good deathsâ€|"

Hup

Roger collapsed

At the mess hall that night it had been mostly silent. Kora had been second in command when Roger was caught. She sat next to him now and looked mainly at her meal while she talked.

"We got through the maintenance tunnels and exited via the back gate. It was empty because most of Red Team thought we were all in the supply depot with you. I'm sorry we didn't go back for you, it would have been suicide."

Roger nodded and continued eating

They had slipped out of the barracks a little after midnight to screw in the woods. They padded down silent black hallways together and crept through moonlit training fields before slipping into the brush and undressing. Neither said much until it was over and it was Roger who finally turned over from looking at the stars and asked Kora if being a Spartan was really going to be worth it. She didn't answer and Roger continued on saying what's the fucking point you know if we're just going to be another number on a roster or fucking grunt getting shot up by aliens so colonists that hate our guts can sleep safely on planets we've never seen, and Kora got up suddenly and began putting her clothes on, and Roger can only remember her crying as she got dressed, her pretty face all dotted with tears that blinked like the stars and then leaving him alone in the woods.

End

file.